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IMPROVING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS OF "DEPRIVED" TEACHERS.

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STUDIES OF THE CLASSROOM VERBAL BEHAVIOR OF TEACHERS SHOW THAT MANY TEACHERS USE THE SAME RATHER NARROW VERBAL INTERACTION PATTERNS BECAUSE (1) THEIR OWN SCHOOL BACKGROUNDS DID NOT INCLUDE EXPOSURE TO TEACHERS WHO USED VARIED VERBAL PATTERNS, (2) THEY DO NOT NOW HEAR VARIED TEACHING PATTERNS, AND (3) THEY ARE NOT PROVIDED WITH OPPORTUNITIES TO PRACTICE GREATER LANGUAGE FACILITY. TO INCREASE TEACHERS' FACILITY IN VERBAL INTERACTION, THE VERBAL INTERACTION CATEGORY SYSTEM (BASED ON THE WORK OF FLANDERS) WAS DEVELOPED BY THE AUTHORS TO CATEGORIZE TEACHER TALK. ITS SIX CATEGORIES INCLUDE--(1) GIVES INFORMATION OR OPINION, (2) GIVES DIRECTION, (3) ASKS NARROW QUESTION, (4) ASKS BROAD QUESTIONS, (5) ACCEPTS IDEAS, BEHAVIOR, OR FEELING, AND (6) REJECTS IDEAS, BEHAVIOR, OR FEELING. ACCEPTANCE OF PUPILS' FEELINGS IS ESPECIALLY DIFFICULT FOR MANY TEACHERS TO EXPRESS AND SEEMS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT IN THE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS SINCE IT ENCOURAGES CHILDREN TO EXPRESS THEIR FEELINGS AND ENABLES THE TEACHER TO DEAL WITH AND UTILIZE THEM. DIFFERENT KINDS OF ACCEPTANCE ARE OUTLINED. TAPING OF CLASS DISCUSSIONS AND WRITING OUT BROAD QUESTIONS AND THOUGHT-PROVOKING STATEMENTS IN ADVANCE ARE OTHER SUGGESTED TOOLS FOR IMPROVING LANGUAGE FACILITY. (AF)

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IMPROVING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS OF "DEPRIVED" TEACHERS

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In recent years we have been hearing and reading of the importance of studying and understanding the language skills of deprived youngsters, and, concurrently, of the need to develop activities to help such children achieve greater language facility. Studies of the classroom verbal behavior of teachers indicate the need for further understanding of the language skills of teachers as well as pupils, with an accompanying need to develop activities which will help teachers achieve greater flexibility in language patterns.[1] These studies show that many teachers use the same rather narrow language patterns over and over and are therefore deprived in terms of language--deprived because in most instances their own school backgrounds did not include exposure to teachers who used varied verbal patterns, because they do not now hear varied teaching patterns, and because they are not provided with opportunities to practice greater language facility and flexibility. In other words, teachers, too, may be regarded as deprived in the area of language--the language of teaching.

A number of systems for categorizing teacher talk have been developed as a result of studies of classroom verbal behavior. One of these, developed by the authors and based upon the work of Flanders, is called the Verbal Interaction Category System (VICS).[2] In this system teacher talk is divided into the following six categories: (1) Gives information or opinion (2) Gives direction (3) Asks narrow question (4) Asks broad question (5) Accepts ideas, behavior or feeling (6) Rejects ideas, behavior or feeling. The VICS also contains categories for pupil talk, but these will not be discussed here.

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Working with large numbers of teachers around the country in meetings and courses designed to help teachers examine classroom verbal behavior, acquire insight into their own talk, and practice varied language patterns, the authors have been struck by the tremendous interest in teaching talk, and also by the difficulty which many teachers have in producing examples of some categories of teacher talk. It is clear that certain verbal behaviors which can improve teacher effectiveness are not in the language repertoires of many teachers. In addition, teachers often show resistance to certain kinds of patterns, with this reluctance to accept the value of some patterns of teacher met in exactly those categories which cannot easily be called forth. However, when it is pointed out that those who do not 'own' certain verbal behaviors do not have the option of deciding whether or not to use them, this resistance is usually overcome. Certainly most teachers would like to have wide and varied patterns of teaching talk to draw upon, and the fact that verbal behavior is confined to patterns which are in one's repertoire is readily understood.

When teachers are presented with examples of pupil expression of negative feeling, such as "I hate English," or on a more personal level, "I hate Billy," and are asked to respond by accepting these feelings, they often are unable to do so. Some usual responses to "I hate English," might be, "Now you don't really mean that," or "I'm sure you can do the work, it isn't that difficult," or "Well, English is terribly important, so you must learn to like it." These responses would not be classified as acceptance, but rather as rejection or as the giving of information or opinion. Examples of acceptance of feeling would be, "You're feeling upset about the assignment," or "I understand your feelings; people often say that about

certain school subjects," or simply, "You feel as if you hate English." When asked to accept the feeling expressed in, "I hate Billy," teachers will tend to say such things as, "Well, Billy likes you, I'm sure," or "That's too bad," or "You don't really mean that." If not specifically asked to respond with verbal acceptance, teachers usually respond to expressions of negative feelings with such rejecting statements as, "Who do you think you are, saying such a thing?" or "Don't you dare speak that way in this class," or "Your opinions don't really interest me." Genuine acceptance of the feeling expressed in, "I hate Billy," would be evidenced by such statements as, "You're feeling angry with Billy now," or "I understand that you're annoyed with Billy," or "People don't always like each other."

Acceptance of feeling would seem to be important in the teaching-learning process, for if youngsters are able to express their feelings then teachers can deal with them, utilizing them to further learning. If the expression of feeling is discouraged, then teachers will not be as effective as they might be. Negative feelings will not disappear if they are ignored or rejected, but they <u>will</u> interfere with the learning process. Pupils should know that feelings of anger and hate, as well as joy and love, exist in everyone. It is important to realize that acceptance of feeling is not necessarily synonymous with praise of these feelings. Praise is one form of acceptance, but it is unlikely that one would ever praise such feelings as, "I hate you." Acceptance in this instance merely means acknowledging the existence of the feelings, evidencing an understanding of them. Sometimes this in itself is enough. Sometimes acceptance would be followed with information or opinion. For instance, one might say, "I understand that you don't like your music period, but it seems to me that if you would only cooperate

more with Miss Jones she would let you sing more of the songs you like." Sometimes an effective teaching pattern for dealing with the expression of negative feelings is to accept the feeling but reject the behavior. In such an instance, a teacher might say, "You're very angry with Johnny because he spoiled your painting, but you must <u>not</u> hit him."

Praise, as we have noted, is one form of acceptance, and this form is widely used by teachers in responding to pupil ideas. "Good," "Right," "Very nice," are examples of frequently used praise. However, acceptance can be shown with patterns other than these brief expressions of undefined approval. Extending or building upon the ideas which pupils express is an effective form of acceptance. If a pupil says, "Indians lived in different kinds of houses because when they had trees around they could use logs, but if they only had animals, they used skins," the teacher might accept these ideas by saying, "You are saying that the kinds of shelters which people build depend upon the materials which are available to them, and the Indians, at that time, had to depend entirely upon their immediate environments for their building materials." Other patterns which accept pupil contributions, and may do more to encourage wide pupil participation than praise, are such furthering statements as, "All right, that's one idea," followed by the question,"Who else has some ideas?" Or teachers might say, "I'll put your suggestions here on the board," or "Does anyone have a comment on John's ideas?" Note that these comments presuppose that the discussion is revolving around expression of ideas and opinions which probably have been called forth by broad rather than narrow questions.

When teachers use certain language patterns from which they seldom deviate; such as asking rather narrow questions, receiving short rote-memory responses, briefly accepting or rejecting the responses and then starting this cycle again by asking other narrow questions, they need help in expanding their verbal behavior. And, as with children who exhibit deprived verbal behavior, practice seems to be essential. That is, teachers need to have opportunities to try on new behaviors in order to acquire them. How can one practice? Participating in some of the workshops and courses which examine verbal teaching behavior is one way. Reading in the field and examining some of the various category systems would certainly make teachers more aware of the existing possibilities. And listening to one's own teaching talk by using the tape recorder is an excellent first step toward enriching teaching patterns. Almost every school has tape recorders available, and it is a simple matter to make a tape which can then be listened to in complete privacy.

If one continues to tape one's teaching, listen to the playback, think about other possible patterns of questioning and responding, and plan accordingly, one can acquire expanded verbal skills. And, as a teacher becomes more secure about listening to himself and analyzing his own material, he might begin to share his tapes with other teacher, who can reciprocate, and together they can analyze and discuss the language of teaching.

Another method for practicing teaching talk is to write out in advance broad questions or thought-provoking statements for certain teaching sessions. There is a vast difference between the kind of planning which consists of writing or thinking, "Ask questions about the story," and that which consists of writing down the

specific language of several possible questions about the story. Actually planning the words to be spoken can make teaching far more creative and effective by allowing the fuller use of one's language skills through advance thinking. The more often teachers practice these kinds of activities, the more they will be able to draw upon a wide variety of language patterns, and, ultimately, they will be able to use the most effective teaching talk spontaneously at the appropriate moment.

If teachers study and examine teaching language, develop increased awareness of their own classroom talk and practice new patterns of questions, and responses, they can expand and make more effective use of their language potential. This widening of language skill can help teachers who are currently "deprived" become "advantaged" in terms of teaching talk.

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